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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the basic elements of Mastery Learning, as outlined by Benjamin S. Bloom, and Mastery Teaching, as outlined by Madeline C. Hunter. It shows that while these two instructional approaches are clearly distinct, they can actually serve as complements to one another. In addition, each can bring added strength to the other such that when used in combination, results are likely to be better than either can achieve alone. Implications for staff development and instructional improvement programs in general are also discussed. (Author)

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BLOOM'S MASTERY LEARNING AND HUNTER'S MASTERY TEACHING:

COMPLEMENT OR CONFLICT

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Abstract

This paper describes the basic elements of Mastery Learning, as outlined by Benjamin S. Bloom, and Mastery Teaching, as outlined by Madeline C. Hunter. It shows that while these two instructional approaches are clearly distinct, they can actually serve as complements to one another. In addition, each can bring added strength to the other such that when used in combination, results are likely to be better than either can achieve alone. Implications for staff development and instructional improvement programs in general are also discussed.

Bloom's Mastery Learning and Hunter's Mastery Teaching: Complement or Conflict

In recent years a number of educational programs have had significant impact on instructional practices in schools across the country. Two of the better known of these are Mastery Learning, initially described by Benjamin S. Bloom (1968, 1971), and Mastery Teaching, described in a series of video tapes and a book by Madeline C. Hunter (1982). Because of the similarity in their titles and because both focus on instructional procedures, these two programs are frequently confused. Even among practitioners who recognize them as distinct, there are many who believe that the two programs may conflict with each other, forcing teachers and educational leaders at all levels to weigh the advantages of each and then choose between them.

A careful analysis of the basic components of Mastery Learning and Mastery Teaching shows, however, that they do not conflict, but actually complement each other. Each focuses on different aspects of the instructional process, and each offers educators important, but distinctly different, advantages. Furthermore, where each program is potentially weak, the other has its major strength. Therefore, when used together these programs are likely to lead to results far more positive than either could yield if used in isolation.

Mastery Learning

Mastery Learning has been traditionally defined as "both a philosophy of school learning and an associated set of specific instructional practices" (Anderson & Block, 1977, p. 163). The philosophical premise of mastery learning is that all children can learn when provided with conditions that are appropriate for their learning. The associated instructional practices are designed to make that philosophical premise a reality in modern classrooms.

Two essential elements form the basis of Mastery Learning instructional practices (Guskey, 1987). The first is the feedback, corrective, and enrichment process. For an instructional program to be accurately labeled "Mastery Learning," it must include some mechanism through which students can be offered regular and specific feedback on their learning progress. In most applications of Mastery Learning this is accomplished through the regular administration of some formative assessment device: a quiz, a skill demonstration, a writing sample, a composition, etc. In addition, that feedback must be paired with specific corrective activities that provide students with guidance and directions as to how they can remedy their problems and correct their learning errors. For students who demonstrate on the formative assessment that they have already learned well, challenging enrichment activities must be provided. Enrichment activities give these fast learners opportunities to extend and broaden their learning while those with difficulties are working to remedy their problems (See Figure 1).

The second essential element of Mastery Learning is congruence among instructional components. For a program to be accurately labeled

"Mastery Learning," it must also ensure there is consistency across the major components of the teaching and learning process. This means that the learning objectives, instructional practices, feedback and corrective procedures, and the techniques used to evaluate student learning must all be aligned with one another (See Figure 2).

Considering these essential elements clearly shows that Mastery Learning's major strength lies in helping teachers become organized prior to instruction as they seek to guarantee instructional congruence, and in the feedback, corrective, and enrichment process following the initial teaching. Although these elements might appear quite simple, extensive research has verified that very positive improvements in student learning can result from their careful and systematic implementation (Block & Burns, 1976; Guskey & Gates, 1986).

The major weakness of Mastery Learning, however, is that it provides little guidance regarding the initial instruction. Mastery Learning is basically neutral with regard to how teachers teach. It offers little or no direction to teachers as to how lessons should be presented or how students should be involved in learning. As such, apart from the organizational skills it may bring, Mastery Learning offers little help to teachers with poor pedagogical skills or those who have difficulty communicating ideas to young people.

Mastery Teaching

Mastery Teaching, on the other hand, is concerned primarily with the initial instruction. It is described as a teacher decision-making model which outlines specific steps teachers should take in order to effectively present a lesson to students. According to Hunter (1979, 1985), the model translates established principles from educational psychology into procedures teachers should follow to assure their students learn well.

Although there are various forms of the Mastery Teaching model, most include five basic steps: 1) anticipatory set and statement of objectives, 2) instruction and modeling, 3) checking understanding, 4) guided practice, and 5) independent practice (See Figure 3). These steps are said to be applicable to all teaching circumstances, regardless of the subject area, grade level, or ability level of the students involved (Brandt, 1985). They offer teachers a precise format for developing their lessons and planning the instructional activities that will compose their class presentations.

Mastery Teaching's principal focus and greatest strength, therefore, is the specification and organization it gives to teachers' initial instruction. It provides teachers with a framework from which they can make thoughtful decisions about the format of their teaching and the instructional procedures they will follow in presenting their lessons.

The major weaknesses of Mastery Teaching, however, are generally found to be two-fold. The first rests in the difficulty most teachers have in bridging the gap between learning objectives, which they are usually required to state in behavioral terms, and the content,

materials, and instructional resources they will use to teach and assess those objectives. Research on teacher planning shows that the principal focus of most teachers as they plan their lessons is not upon behavioral objectives and learner outcomes, but rather upon instructional materials and learning activities (Peterson, Marx, & Clark, 1978; Yinger, 1980; Zahorik, 1975). It is probably for this reason that most teachers find the "task analysis" activities involved in developing the behavioral objectives for the first step in the Mastery Teaching model so difficult. They perceive these activities as removed and apart from what traditionally has been their major concern when planning instruction.

The second weakness in Mastery Teaching is the lack of any mechanism within the model by which teachers can gain direct evidence of its positive effects on student learning. Such evidence is extremely important to teachers and has been identified as a critical element in their continued use and expansion of any innovation (Berman & McLaughlin, 1976; Guskey, 1986; Stallings, 1980). This may explain, at least partially, why teachers tend to abandon their use of the Mastery Teaching model as soon as support is withdrawn (Stallings, 1987), and why studies evaluating the implementation of the Mastery Teaching have failed to yield more positive results (Stallings, 1985; Stallings & Krasavage, 1986).

Complimentary Models

As can be seen, Mastery Learning and Mastery Teaching are clearly distinct. Their major foci, research foundations, major strengths and major weaknesses all differ significantly. But these differences are not contradictory. In fact, analysis of these differences shows that Mastery Learning and Mastery Teaching can serve well to complement each other. To a Mastery Learning program, Mastery Teaching adds the instruction component that gives teachers specific guidance in how to initially present lessons to their students in a manner that is efficient yet highly effective. Mastery Teaching helps teachers familiar with Mastery Learning to recognize the important instructional decisions that need to be addressed in preparing their lesson plans and conducting class sessions.

Similarly, to a Mastery Teaching program, Mastery Learning adds the organizational strategies that help teachers synthesize learning objectives and teaching materials into meaningful instructional units. In planning for Mastery Learning, teachers develop what are called "Tables of Specifications" (Bloom, Madaus, & Hastings, 1981; Guskey, 1985). These tables serve the same purpose as "task analysis" or the development of behavioral objectives. But typically, teachers use their instructional materials as a guide in developing the tables. As such, they can more readily bridge the gap between learning objectives and their instructional materials, while at the same time coming to recognize some of the weaknesses and limitations in those materials. In addition, most teachers find developing tables of specifications far easier than developing extensive lists of behavioral objectives, simply

because the tables are more instructionally oriented.*

Furthermore, Mastery Learning also provides, through the formative assessment and corrective process, a mechanism by which teachers can gain important and direct evidence on the effects of their implementation efforts. Formative tests furnish teachers, as well as students, with documentation on learning progress and improvements. At regular intervals throughout the instructional sequence, formative tests offer tangible evidence of the gains that have been made and the successes that have been achieved. This evidence not only serves to sustain implementation efforts, it also can be used to guide further refinements in teachers' applications of the program.

Hence, Mastery Learning aids Mastery Teaching and Mastery Teaching aids Mastery Learning. Together, these two approaches appear to hold great promise for improving both the effectiveness of teachers and the learning of students.

Discussion

The confusion that presently exists between Mastery Learning and Mastery Teaching appears to be working to the detriment of both. This is a particularly sad situation since each is trying to accomplish precisely the same goal: the improvement of student learning. However, each is attempting to do so through different, but complementary means.

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* For a detailed explanation of the development and uses of tables of specification, see "Outlining Learning Objectives," Chapter 2 in Implementing Mastery Learning (Guskey, 1985).

A clear description of the differences between Mastery Learning and Mastery Teaching, coupled with a detailed explanation of the complementary nature of each to the other, would be extremely valuable in staff development programs dealing with either one. Such a description would undoubtedly help dispel some of the confusion between the two that is so prevalent at the present time. In addition, it would help teachers see that each is not simply a new and unrelated innovation pill that must be swallowed and endured. Rather, each is a flexible and broadly applicable approach to teaching and learning, designed to provide teachers with powerful tools they can use to enhance their instructional effectiveness.

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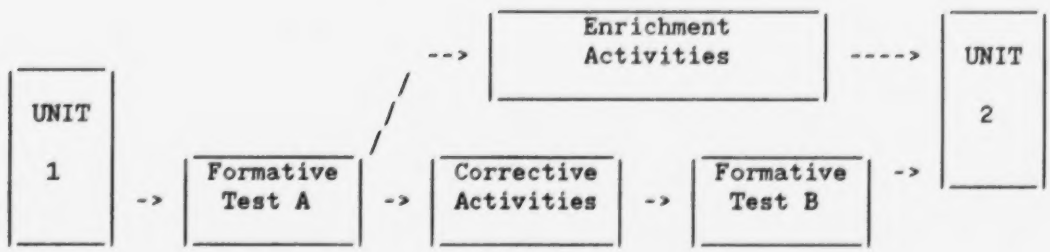

Figure 1. The Feedback, Corrective, and Enrichment Process in Mastery Learning

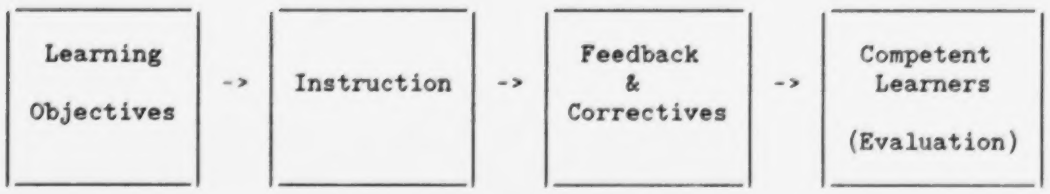

Figure 2. Major Instructional Components Among Which Mastery Learning Requires Congruence

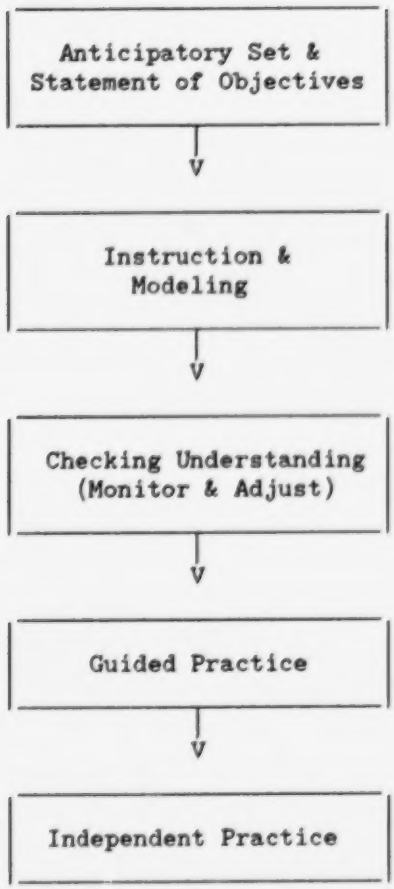

Figure 3. The Basic Components of the Mastery Teaching Lesson Design